

William Gruber, English, Creative Nonfiction

I first conceived of my project—"Writing about Place"--thinking mainly to define more formally a component of a course I've been teaching since 2003. Each semester when I teach creative nonfiction we read extensively among writers for whom a sense of place is critical. In past semesters, for example, we've read about Arches National Park (Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*); Virginia's Roanoke Valley (Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*); the Shetland Islands and other out-of-the-way northern landscapes (Lawrence Millman, *Last Places*); and San Francisco during the late 60s (Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*). Much of the best recent nonfiction celebrates specific places and environments (urban landscapes as well as wildernesses), and it seemed natural to me to make "writing about place" more formally a part of English 376, Creative Nonfiction, specifically as a proposal for Emory's Piedmont Project. I thought I had little to learn about the subject, but since participating last month in the Piedmont workshops I'm afraid I've done nothing but complicate a task I thought would be simple. As it has turned out, after dedicating part of my course to writing about place, I've begun to read up on "place" and discovered the fabulous richness of the concept. A small sampling of what I've come across thus far: Aristotle thought that "place" was an epiphenomenon, a consequence of the more basic reality of motion; Romans assigned places a *genius loci*, or personal spirit (not necessarily an outmoded idea: one sometimes hears people talk as if certain places seem to have their own peculiar "identity"); some contemporary philosophers link humans' attachment to places with the foundations of subjectivity ("beings surround themselves," says Georges Poulet, "with the places where they find themselves, the way one wraps oneself up in a garment that is at one and the same time a disguise and a characterization"); and multitudes of "placebloggers" post daily observations about the places they live in terms of their ecology and the "lived experience" of their inhabitants. I certainly don't plan to put all of this material into a creative writing course (though I can see the potential to develop a more traditional course in literary criticism and history with this as its topic). But I'm curious to see what places students choose to write about in their own work. So far, so good.

English 376, Creative Nonfiction (Fall, 2010)

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Overview of course: English 376 is a workshop in the personal essay, on learning how to write in this digressive, informative, intimate, and sometimes eccentric mode of literature. Students will be expected to develop the skills and habits of mind necessary to write about real things with thoughtfulness, clarity, honesty, and zest. Because this is a class in creative writing, it is therefore—necessarily—also a class in critical reading. Good writers are always good readers; it's impossible to learn to write well without learning how to read well, and I've structured the class to include both of these activities. In our weekly seminars we'll discuss readings in contemporary nonfiction as well as your own writing assignments. These discussions will be less concerned with "what" writers are saying than with "how" they're saying it: for example, in one workshop we might discuss "voice" in nonfiction and how to discover it, while in another we might talk about point of view, imagery and metaphor, description, or when—and when not—to use narrative. (An essay is almost never simply a story, but almost all contemporary essayists tell stories.) Of particular emphasis this term will be the concept of "place" in recent nonfiction, and we will study how contemporary writers such as André Aciman, Edward Abbey, Verlyn Klinkenborg, and Lawrence Millman use the personal essay to address

subjects of broad social or political concern such as nature, landscape, and wild or urban environments. Our goal for the semester is to complete a number of shorter pieces (about 1000 words each) as well as one larger personal essay (15-20 pages) of publishable quality. Grades will be based on the quality of your own written work and to a lesser extent on your participation in class discussions and workshops.

Texts include:

André Aciman, *False Papers*
Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*
Joan Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*
Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*
Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris*
Verlyn Klinkenborg, *The Rural Life*
Lawrence Millman, *Last Places*

Over the course of the semester each of you will have your writing discussed in detail several times by the other members of the seminar. Weekly writing assignments will vary in length from about 300 to 1,000 words. You should post these on our Blackboard site each week no later than Monday morning, 9:00 a.m. All students (that is, not only those students who are having their writing discussed that week in class) must post their work every week. One major project, an essay of about 2,500-3,000 words (about 10-12 pages) will be due the last day of class.

Finally, remember that a class like this one depends for its success on the regular contributions of all of its members. Attendance at our weekly meetings is therefore mandatory.

Schedule of Readings and Workshops:

Wednesday, August 25: Introduction

September 1: Verlyn Klinkenborg, *The Rural Life*; workshops (2)

September 8: Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris*; workshops (2)

September 15: workshops (3)

September 22: Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*; workshops (2)

September 29: workshops (3)

October 6: Lawrence Millman, *Last Places*; workshops (2)

October 13: workshops (3)

October 20: Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*; workshops (2)

October 27: workshops (3)

November 3: Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*; workshops (2)

November 10: workshops (3)

November 17: André Aciman, *False Papers*; workshops (1)

November 24: workshops (3)

December 1: workshops (3); final essays due.